

Pearce, Warren. (2013, November 3). The Subterranean War on Science? A comment. *Making Science Public*. Retrieved from <https://blogs.nottingham.ac.uk/makingsciencepublic/2013/11/03/the-subterranean-war-on-science-a-comment/>

Last week saw the publication of an article entitled “The Subterranean War on Science”¹ in the Association of Psychological Science’s *Observer* magazine. The authors – scientists from a range of disciplines – reflect on their experiences of their work becoming noticed in public. In particular, they argue that the harassment, bullying and abuse of scientists constitute a ‘war on science’ which should be publicised, with a view to “enable lawmakers to improve the balance between academic freedom and confidentiality of peer review on the one hand, and the public’s right to access information on the other”.

I submitted a ‘below the line’ comment to the piece on Friday. Unfortunately, the comment does not seem to have made it through moderation so I reproduce it below. Any thoughts – on topic please – much appreciated. In short, while bullying and harassment should not be tolerated anywhere in society, I am unconvinced as to the need for new laws to protect a particular (relatively powerful) section of society:

Interesting piece, thanks. Some practical issues spring to mind as a result:

1) How does one differentiate between ‘vexatious’ or ‘trivial’ requests for data and those which are merited? The authors give the example of timestamps for blogposts as trivial, but one could imagine occasions when such information might be quite important. There appears to be an appeal to lawmakers to act in the final paragraph. Is this really the best way to proceed? An ethics committee containing a rich mix of personnel drawn from different sections and strata of society (ie not just academics) might provide better, context-specific judgements.

2) 3rd party re-analysis of data is surely a staple of science. Of course, those doing so may have particular motivations (as in the Philip Morris example), but one would have a hard time preventing this taking place. Recent history shows the perils for scientific credibility of not making data available.

3) The piece vividly depicts some troubles and tribulations of science (and indeed, life) in the modern world. However, it might benefit from a stronger counterpoint than the final paragraph’s nod to the “public’s right to access to information”. The activities of climate sceptics may well represent an “insertion into the scientific process”, and I do not offer a blanket defence of their multifarious criticisms and approaches. In particular, where bullying is identified it should not be tolerated anywhere in modern society. However, the arrival of online fora has demonstrated that the public are not always a passive group waiting for the latest scientific knowledge to be visited upon them. On occasion they can be somewhat unruly and, if sufficiently motivated, they may wish to “insert themselves” in any way they can with the limited tools available to them; especially as members of the public do not enjoy the same access to journals as academics. This may be an inconvenient truth, but it is also a fact of modern life. With better systems for dealing with this, we can hopefully focus more on transparent and robust methods of managing conflicts – both legitimate and otherwise – between science and society, rather than seeking to devise new laws to protect the former from the latter.

REFERENCE

1. Lewandowsky, S., Mann, M. E., Bauld, L., Hastings, G. & Loftus, E. F. The Subterranean War on Science - Association for Psychological Science. *Observer* **26**, (2013).